

TESTIMONY OF ELLEN SMALL, MSW
Appropriations Committee
February 10, 2009

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Geragosian, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ellen Small, and I am a resident of Wethersfield. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this evening.

I am here to speak in opposition to the **Governor's Bill No. 839, concerning the transfer of the position of Child Advocate to the Attorney General's office**, the elimination of all staff serving the Office of the Child Advocate, and the elimination of the Child Advocate's independent oversight and accountability for state-funded services to children currently provided by the Child Advocate and her staff.

I had the opportunity two years ago to complete an internship with the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) while earning my Master of Social Work degree at the UConn School of Social Work.

During the course of my nearly year-long internship, I had the privilege of meeting some pretty incredible kids. Although I cannot adequately convey in three minutes what the OCA has meant to these kids, allow me to paint a brief picture of the children who count on the accountability provided by the Child Advocate and her staff.

These are kids who experience unimaginable trauma, resulting in removal from their biological parents and years living with strangers. Children repeatedly neglected and abused at the hands of many who now languish in our state children's psychiatric hospital with little hope of achieving permanency and stability before their eighteenth birthday. Young girls whose printed history with our state's child welfare agency exceeds 500 pages, detailing extensive trauma and graphic victimization, who now sit in maximum security prison cells rather than high school classrooms. And children who despite all the wrongs done to them have not lost sight of their vision for a successful future.

Some have "transitioned" into the adult system to receive mental health treatment. Others have graduated from high school and have hopes of attending college. Some remain incarcerated. And some of these youth have lost their lives.

These are the children who call the state of Connecticut their legal guardian. These are the children who rely on tax-payer funded services to have even their most basic daily needs met. These are the children who will be devastated by the changes proposed to the Office of the Child Advocate.

It is my strong conviction that the Office of the Child Advocate gives a voice to children who have been silenced. The OCA provides the vital services of oversight and accountability for agencies and programs receiving state funds for children, existing to ensure children in our child welfare system are kept safe, have their treatment needs met, and experience the highest quality of life possible while under the state's care.

The kids who rely on the accountability and oversight provided by the OCA are not statistics. They are not line-items. Their experiences cannot be summed up by their involvement with a three-letter agency. Their backs should not have to bear the weight of balancing the state budget. They are someone's child. And they are our responsibility.

The OCA has brought to the Legislature, the Governor, and the public's attention inadequate and unacceptable conditions for children and youth at various state-funded and state-operated facilities for well over a decade. As a result, the Office has helped to improve the way our state serves children and families.

But their work is not finished... In fact, it is needed now more than ever.

If the Governor's proposed changes to the OCA are accepted, it will have staggering consequences for Connecticut's most vulnerable children and families.

I urge you to support the continuation of the services provided by the Office of the Child Advocate. Thank you for your time and consideration.